

When Stars Collide (parts 15-22)

by Serendipity

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Summary: When a lonely hacker helps an angel get back his soul, she soon finds she may lose her heart in the bargain

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><strong><font><font>When Stars Collide<font>\*\*

By Serendipity

><font>(part 15-part 22)<font>

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>Part 15 <p>"So yes, in a word, Canada was awesome." <p>

"That's so great."

"Although I have to admit that there were a few close calls with my aunt and uncle. There was this one time, just after we  
>crossed the border, that I swore one of them would zap the other into oblivion they were fighting so much. I was hoping that it  
<br>would be my uncle and not my aunt since she was driving and all. It really amazes me that they've lived together for so long.  
>Oh, and did you see those signs they put up all over town?"  
<p>

"No, I haven't really left the house these past few days."

"Well that's healthy."

"You're not helping."

"Sorry. Anyway, there's some 'theme night' deal at the Bronze."

Willow groaned, "Okay, let's hear it."

"This Saturday it's 'swing'."

"Oh, well that's not too bad."

"That's what I said. In fact, I think we should go. It'd be cool. I could just conjure us  
>up some authentic looking clothes, not to mention a few guides on exactly how to swing danceâ€|" <p>

"That sounds greatâ€|hey, you know what? That reminds me, Amy, we actually have another commitment that night."

"Really?"

"Yeahâ€|" Willow crossed her fingers nervously, "We've been invited toâ€|umm..a private party."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"You don't sound to excited," the blonde paused suspiciously, "Why do you not sound excited?"

"It's not really a big deal...it's just thatâ€|wellâ€|"

"Spit it out."

"It's at Cordelia's house." She instantly held the telephone receiver arms length away from her ear in preparation for the  
>inevitable screaming. Much to her surprise, she didn't happen.  
<p>

Amy was too busy laughing hysterically.

Cautiously, Willow returned the phone to its original position, "A-Amy?"

The other girl erupted into a fit of giggles, "Cordelia's house?? Cordelia-I'm-such-a-skank-I-can-barely-believe-it-myself  
>Chase invited us to a party? That's a good one Will," she gasped shouting into the receiver, "Yeah, and I'll bet she even invited  
<br>us to sleep over." With that, she started giggling all over again.

The hacker was somewhat less than amused, "Actually, she did."

Almost as abruptly as the laughter had begun, it stopped.

"What?"

"Cordelia called. She invited me to sleep over, I said yes. She called back later and I mentioned that you might want to come

>too." <p>

"You're kidding, right?"

"I dunno, I just thought it would be a nice way for us to all get together and to get to know one another."

"Are you on crack?"

"No, I'm serious, Am-,"

"WILLOW. I-I can't believe you. Are you insane? Have you forgotten all of the hell that girl put us through? I might be the >witch in name, but Cordelia Chase is more of one in spirit than I'll ever be." <p>

"Amyâ€| "

"How about that time in third grade when she cheated off of you during a spelling test and then framed you for it? Or in seventh

>grade when she tripped you down that flight of stairs and you broke your arm? Are you totally forgetting the 'We Hate <br>Cordelia Club' of which you were the founder AND president? Jesse was the vice president, I was the secretary and Xander >was the treasurer. Granted, we disbanded when we found out that Xander had been embezzling funds to buy ice cream, but let <br>me tell you, that organization had promise!"

"AMY!"

"What about the bitchy 'Hey Willow, I see you've found the softer side of Sears' comments she made all through ninth and >tenth grade? How can you forgive her so easily? H-How can you just agree to go into her house? It's like official enemy <br>territory for pete's sakes."

"Amy, now you're just overreacting. Look, this was NOT a simple decision. You weren't in the library that night when Angel >showed up and Giles went nuts and there was all that fighting. She actually stood up for me. I mean, she's been trying to be <br>nicer lately and, well, I just think we should give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Good grief."

"I'm serious."

There was a brief period of silence as both girls were lost in thought.

"Amy?" Willow finally ventured cautiously.

"Fine."

"What?"

"Fine, I'll go."

"Thank you," she beamed.

"You know that I'm only doing this for you, right?"

"Yes, I do, and I appreciate it immensely."

"Only because you're my friend."

"And you're mine."

"I hope you realize that am giving up a perfectly good Saturday night to enter the BOWELS OF HELL all because you're my >friend." <p>

"Amy?"

"Yeah?"

"You can stop now."

Willow stifled a giggle and Amy just frowned.

"All I'm saying is that if she so much as mentions the word "makeover" I'm turning her into a rat."

"It's a deal."

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Part 16

"And you have absolutely no idea who attacked you?"

"None whatsoever. Just some anonymous chic vamp, who, might I add, did some serious damage," the slayer paused to point >at the bandage on her neck, "My mom is not gonna buy ANY story I come up with to explain this one. Oh, there's one thing <br>that I do remember, the male vampire she was with mentioned something about you 'betraying the clan'."

Angel frowned.

"That means something to you?"

"It might," He took a deep breath, "Over the past 3 weeks, our group, or 'clan' as we refer to ourselves, were in preparation >of a rather large takeover. This plan was halted and rescheduled once I regained my soul, at least according to what I've been <br>told by certain sources, however, I'm still privy to some very delicate information on terms of where certain people and things >are located. Much of these things can't be moved very quickly or easily." <p>

Buffy nodded slowly, "So you kinda know where their secret base is?"

"In a way."

"Then let's go nuke em. How come you didn't mention all this before?"

"No, Buffy, we can't do anything to them right now. I think that what they did to you was just a warning. They are, however, >very capable of doing much much more. Let's just say that Spike wasn't very pleased when he found out I'd switched sides." <p>

"I can handle them."

"But can Willow? O-or Xander for that matter? What about Giles? Cordelia? Buffy, they aren't at all above attacking your >friends to get to you. They know where you live, what you do, and what your weaknesses are. They know who you're friends <br>are, when they're alone and when they're unprotected. It's a skill they learned from me, I'm afraid," he sat down next to her >and put his head in his hands. <p>

"Angel, don't blame yourself for this," the slayer sighed softly and inched closer to him, >"You weren't in control then. You've risked your own life so many times just to save ours. You would never endanger anyone, <br>I know that and so does everyone else. Trust me, we'll figure something out."

He nodded slowly and turned his head to give her a grateful smile.

Big mistake.

She smiled back and leaned closer, a mildly seductive gleam in her eyes, "You know Angel," she said softly, "I've been >thinking a lot about us, in general." <p>

He felt his heartbeat pick up almost automatically, the way it always did whenever she was close, "And?"

"And I think that we should maybe talk about things more," she leaned even closer and he could feel her breath on his cheek, >"consider our options." <p>

He gently touched the side of her face, brushing her blond locks away from her eyes, "Options?"

She smiled again and brushed her lips against his, "I think it should be fine as long as we take things slowly."

The kiss that followed, was, well, amazing. Angel felt his body respond in the same way it always did when he was with Buffy.

And yet, something was very wrong.

Certainly, his heart was beating triple time and his skin was heating up rapidly wherever she came in contact, nevertheless, there >was something deep in his mind and in his soul which was literally screaming in protest. <p>

Reluctantly, he broke away from her and stood up, "You're right, I think we should take this slowly."

She looked a bit surprised, "Angel, is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," unable to return her gaze he turned around and picked up his jacket.

"W-where are you going?"

"I'm going to take a walk. Maybe do some checking up on who attacked you and what's going on."

"Now?" she asked, shocked.

"Well, yes. It'd be a good idea if you stayed here until I got back."

"Yeah. Great."

He couldn't miss the intense sound of disappointment in her voice and it broke his heart.

>Turning slightly, he glanced over at her as he opened the door, "I'll be back soon," he said, throwing her a lopsided grin. <p>

She nodded, "Be careful."

"I will."

"Angel, I lo-,"

He closed the door behind him.

"-ve you," Buffy finished softly.

There was no response.

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## Part 17

She had long since changed out of her clothes and was now sitting, barefoot, in a thin white nightgown. Thoughtfully, she stared >at the rows of black and white keys before hitting one. The note ran out so clear and loudly that it brought tears to her eyes. <p>

Life was, as Willow had come to realize, very strange.

She sighed softly and stared at the shiny black surface of the piano. It had been almost two hours since she'd hung up the >phone after talking to Amy and the house was dead silent. <p>

Not that this was really anything new. She was used to being by herself. For instance, this entire past week her parents had >been out of town. <p>

But in that time, Willow had never really felt lonely. Not like she did now.

Thinking about things was a rather nasty habit she'd picked up during her childhood. Unfortunately, her seemingly endless >loneliness gave her a lot of time to do just that. And while she'd been busy thinking, a few somewhat frightening thoughts had <br>entered her head. Thoughts which refused to go away and which

couldn't be dismissed. Thoughts about Angel.

In frustration, the redhead slammed her fist into the keys, producing an oddly comforting discordant sound.\_\_

\_She missed him.\_

Using both of her hands this time, she pounded out a sad and painful chord.

\_It was more than that, though. Even she wasn't so naïve and stupid.\_

In pure irritation and a desperate need to escape her own mind, she turned her full attention to the piano.

\_All her life, things like this seemed to happen to her. Nothing could ever be simple.\_

Starting off shakily, she started to play. The song she chose was sad and wistful but had an undercurrent of strength.

\_It made her almost sick to admit it, but it was true. In all the time she'd known him, she never thought anything like\_><em>this could happen. She'd never been in a position for anything like this to happen. Mentally, she'd kicked herself for<em>

><em>being so easy, for being so vulnerable. Past experience alone should have made her more cautious.<em>

Her playing rose to an almost frenzied pitch as she reached the chorus of the song. She actually began sweating from the>exertion as the tears sprang to her eyes, blinding her ability to see the keys. <p>

\_Maybe she could pull back, pull away from the situation. Maybe she could just close herself off and it would go away.\_

Crying openly now, she forced herself to close her eyes and to play the song completely by feel. In her heart, she remembered>how and when her fingers were supposed to strike the keys. The music was so loud that it could be heard clearly across the <br>street through the open window.

\_She knew though, that she couldn't. She wasn't Buffy or Cordelia. She was Willow. Poor, stupid, pathetic little Willow\_

><em>Rosenberg. And once she grew emotionally involved or attached to someone, she could never get away. Besides, it was<em>><em>too late.<em>

She had already fallen in love with him.  
> <p>

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He stood under the street lamp, staring at her through the open window. He was almost mesmerized by her playing. It took him>a few moments to figure out the song, but eventually he placed it.<br>"I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues" by Elton John, if he

was correct.

He leaned against the lamppost, a concerned look flashing through his dark eyes. Is she unhappy? Did something happen? I >should have visited or called her sooner. &gt; He silently berated himself over and over again. <p>

Somehow, his 'walk' had taken him past the Rosenberg residence, as it had several times in the past. Feeling only somewhat >guilty that he wasn't currently researching who had attacked Buffy and why, Angel gradually began to relax. <p>

Maybe I'm reading too much into this. >

The rest of the street was dark. Most lights were off since the neighbors were either asleep or had left town for vacation. He

>wondered absently why Willow had opted to stay during these two weeks as opposed to going to Boston with her parents. <br>Maybe she had something more important to take care of in town. Schoolwork or that sort of thing.

Shrugging, he pushed off of the post and prepared to go on his way. He didn't want to disturb her, after all.

Once he was out of the glare of the overhead light, however, he got a better look at her. She's playing with her eyes closed.

>&gt; Smiling internally, he hummed along with her playing while starting to cross the street. Talented girl. &gt; That's when he saw <br>something else.

> Wait-is she crying? &gt; The smile vanished altogether and his entire face darkened. <br> What's going on? > Standing stock still now, he stared across at her openly. The entire scene had shifted in a matter of

>seconds. She was obviously in serious distress over something, but what? He growled under his breath, If that idiot Xander <br>said or did something&#160;| > Yet again, Angel was reminded of the moronic, hormonally challenged teenager who couldn't see

>what was right under his nose even if it hit him in the head. It's his own loss that he can't see what a treasure she is, but I <br>wish that she wasn't so affected by his blindness. > Ironically,

it was then that she opened her eyes. The song was ending and >he hadn't even noticed. In a sudden fit of panic, Angel realized that he was essentially out in the wide open, smack in the middle <br>of the street, staring like a fool through the window of a seventeen-year-old. She'll probably think I'm stalking her or

>something&#160;| &gt; <p>

All fears vanished, however, when her green eyes turned their gaze, almost casually, out the window. She sent him a small smile

>as she hit the final note of the song. Slowly, she stood, pushed the bench away from the piano, and left the room. <p>

Angel watched her leave, his heartbeat quickening inexplicably.

Fully expecting the vampire to have left by the time she got there, Willow opened her front door anyway. Much to her surprise, >she found him standing on the porch. <p>



She grinned at him shyly and he grinned back. She looks like a fairy dressed all in white...or an angel. > There was almost an >warmth, an aura of some sort that followed the hacker wherever she went. It had a tendency to put Angel at ease and to make <br>him want to share things with her. It made him want her to be comfortable.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before she started fidgeting self-consciously. Suddenly, she remembered what she >was wearing and how she must look. In an attempt to explain her unkempt appearance, she took a deep breath and opened <br>her mouth, only to find that he'd done the exactly same thing.

Blushing slightly she shook her head and silently urged him to speak first.

I've never seen such expressive eyes > he thought. "Iâ€|ahhâ€|I used to come here a lot," he began cautiously, "Even before I >lost my soul. I'd just come walking..kind of late at night. I'd stop by that lamp post across the street." <p>

She nodded.

"Ever since last year. After I came into your room for the first time when I needed your help. You remember, when I wanted to >ask you about Buffy's ex-boyfriend. I mean, then I knew where you lived. I'd come by after that just to listen to you play. <br>You're very talented."

She shook her head and stared at the floor, "How are things with you and Buffy?" she whispered softly.

Somewhat surprised by the change of subject, Angel frowned, "We're okay, she came by tonight. Actually, she's still at my

>apartment." <p>

"Really?" Willow was careful to keep every hint of emotion out of her voice.

"Yes. We've been talking a lot lately." Why won't she look at me? > "Willow, is something wrong?"

Almost instantly, she glanced up at him, "N-no, I'm fine." It was strange for someone to be so perceptive to her feelings and

>thoughts. Normally, it was the other way around. She was the one listening to everyone else's problems. She'd have to learn to <br>be more careful around him. "I've just been thinking a lot lately."

"About?" he prodded gently.

She sighed, "Nothing important."

"Willow, anything you think about is important."

His conviction surprised her a bit and even embarrassed her to a certain extent. She dropped her gaze yet again.

Feeling a bit more willing to venture out first in building up a sense of trust between them, he decided to offer up a confession of  
>his own, "Buffy actually kissed me tonight." <p>

There were additional moments of silence and the hacker almost seemed to have trouble breathing. Angel furrowed his brows  
>and waited for her to respond. <p>

"Oooh, that'sâ€¦that's justâ€¦.great," she pretty much choked out.

She still refuses to look at me. > Angel sighed.

Leaning against the edge of the doorway, near her head, he let out a soft laugh, "Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explainâ€¦I-I just didn't react very well to it." He gently touched the side of her face and bent closer to get a better  
>look at it. <p>

She glanced up at him again, their noses just inches apart, "Why?"

"Something was wrong. I can't verbalize it too well. Something just didn'tâ€¦fit anymore. I think I wasn't really comfortable. It  
>was a weird situation to be in. I've always felt so open with Buffy in the past. I guess there are just some things that take longer  
<br>to fix than others. It's a good thing I have you to talk to."

Something in her green eyes lit up just a bit and he smiled, it felt nice to make her happy. He was glad she was beginning to  
>trust him and that she could tell he trusted her. " It's a shame, though. That was one hell of a kiss," he joked. <p>

The light died almost instantly and she pulled away from him. His own smile faded.  
> What did I say? &gt; <p>

"Th-that'sâ€¦nice. Listen, Angel, I hate to do this to you, but it's pretty late. I should be going to bed. I have some research to  
>do tomorrow for Giles and all." <p>

"Oh," he straightened up as well, "Alright, no problem."

"Goodnight," She quickly backed into the house and started to close the door.

"Wait-Willow, would you like to do something with me tomorrow, though?"

She paused. The door was almost completely shut and all he could see were her eyes. Those two, beautiful, dark green eyes.  
>They were full of tears. <p>

"I..umm..I don't think that's a good idea Angel. I have a lot to do tomorrow. Maybe some other night."

He nodded, openly disappointed. She was shutting him out, both physically as well as emotionally. Something was happening >and she was obviously holding it back from him. There was so much pain and loneliness in those green eyes. <p>

The door softly clicked shut and he sighed.

The same kind of loneliness reflected in his soul.

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Part 18

Amy couldn't believe it.

She was already a full forty minutes into the "slumber party" and she honestly hadn't had the urge to kill Cordelia.

Even now, as the self-involved brunette happily spread a yogurt and oatmeal based relaxation mask on her face, she was >actually enjoying it. <p>

"So, yeah. If you keep this on for about 20 minutes, it'll look great once we wash it off.  
>It'll get rid of all of those stress wrinkles you've been having and the blotchiness in <br>your complexion. Cause, you know, that makes you look really kinda gross."

Well, no one was perfect.

"Cordy, have you seen Willow?"

The dark haired cheerleader finished placing cucumber slices on the other girl's eyes and paused to look around, "Nope. I >think she's in the other room watching TV or something. Some old show called Kindred: The Embrace, I think. The lead guy is <br>really hot, that's why I remember," she lowered her voice, "We've really got to do something about her.."

Amy frowned, "Who, Willow?"

"She is getting into this really sulky vibe. Not that I blame her, but still. It's not healthy..have you seen her hair? Come to think >of it, we should fix it before we go to the Bronze." <p>

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"Willow's been hanging around, pouting, and not eating or sleeping. Have you seen >how thin and pale she is? What kind of friend are you?" <p>

"Hang on, Cordelia, what are you saying?"

"Well, I mean, hel-loâ€¦it's beyond obvious that she totally wants

him."

Amy's blood literally ran cold, "Him?" she asked weakly.

"Well duh. Angel!," she hissed.

Amy looked vaguely ill.

"It's sooo there. I mean, when she talks about him and her face lights up like a little puppy-dog? It's borderline pathetic. I

>mean, they'd make a cute couple and all, but it's like neither of them are going to make a move. It's impossible." <p>

What?! >Sitting up, the witch took the cucumbers off of her eyes in one quick gesture, "Wait, are you saying that you think >Angel actually likes Willow?" <p>

"Shhh!!" Cordelia sank down next to Amy's chair with a conspiratory smile, "You weren't in the library that night, were you?"

"No, I wasn't."

"You should have SEEN the look on his face when she stood in front of him, like RIGHT in front of the crossbow!" She was in

>full-fledged gossip mode. <p>

"It wasâ€¦intense?"

"Like, beyond. I was so surprised, I couldn't believe it. I mean, I was sorta distracted by the fact that Xander was acting like >an ass and all, but there was NO WAY you could miss the look on Angel's face." <p>

"Cordelia, I wasn't there. You need to be more explicit."

"He wants her!"

"You mean it?" Amy could barely contain her excitement, "Oh wow. W-we need to tell her."

"Are you dense? We can't tell her."

"Why?"

"Well A. she'd never believe us and 2. she'd get all nervous around him. No, we can't tell her."

"Cordelia, no offense, but that's about the dumbest thing I've heard in a long time. If we clue her in, she'll know and she'll be

>happier around him. Right now I think she's sending mixed signals in his direction without realizing it. If we tell her, it'll probably <br>work to get them together."

"Look, I hate to bring this up, but do you have a boyfriend?"

"Well, no."

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"What's your point?"

"My point is that I have a lot more experience in this than you do."

Amy paused, "Point taken."

"Great, then we're agreed."

"Agreed to what? What are we supposed to do??"

The conspiratory smile returned and Cordelia's dark eyes sparkled, "Not so fast. First, we need a plan!"

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Willow sat staring blankly at the flickering images on the television.

I can't believe I did that to Angel yesterday night. > For the hundredth time  
>that day, she cringed as she recalled the hurt look in his eyes when she'd shut the door in his face. That was NOT something <br>that a good friend does. >

Moaning, she slowly leaned sideways and fell onto the couch. Not to mention the fact that tomorrow is his birthday. >

Although the vampire hadn't told her, she'd managed to "sneak a peek" at some of Giles' diaries while she was helping to  
>research that morning. After picking up this little fact, she'd taken some time to secretly sift through some of Amy's spell books  
<br>to see if she could conjure up a good gift.

It had taken almost an hour, but Willow knew what she wanted to give him. Granted the spell was a bit complex, but she had  
>faith in her growing capabilities when it came to the black arts.  
<p>

Heck, I restored his soul, how bad can it be? >

The excursion to the library itself had been more than just informative. It had also served to help patch up her relationship with  
>the Giles. Although somewhat awkward at first, the visit proved to be very successful. Despite herself, Willow grinned as she  
<br>recalled how the librarian had gone scurrying around the room, cleaning off her workspace, dusting the computer keyboard,  
>and bringing her cushions to sit on throughout the day. He'd even brought her tea and crumpets before lunch, all the while <br>asking if she wanted anything else. Giles was literally in hyperdrive when it came to making amends.

She appreciated every second of it though. Sometimes it was hard to

>remember that people actually cared about her. It was nice to receive a reminder <br>every now and then.

"Hey! Ready to go?"

Glancing up at the door, she saw Amy standing in front of her, grinning a little too broadly.

Cordelia's head popped up over her shoulder. She was sporting a matching facial expression.

Glancing warily from one girl to the other, she sighed softly.

Terrific, now what? >

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It was almost 10 and Angel felt like a nervous teenager. He hovered silently in  
>the darkest corner of the Bronze, his eyes skillfully skimming the faces before him. <p>

Where the heck is she? >

He felt terrible about ignoring her these past few days and felt even worse after she'd closed the door on him the night before.  
> I'm going to make it up to her if it's the last thing I do. &gt;  
<p>

Tapping his foot absently against the floor, he thrust his hands into his pockets and hummed along to the music.

As long as she shows up first. >

As if on cue, Cordelia suddenly appeared at the far end of the room. The dark haired cheerleader was clad in a deep red dress  
>which, although decidedly vintage in style, clung around her hips in a very suggestive manner. It was also cut very high. On the <br>left, she was flanked by Amy whose clothing was extremely similar. In fact, the only difference between them was that  
>Cordelia's was maroon and Amy's was a dark blue which matched her eyes. <p>

But where's Willow? >

After a few tense moments, he got his answer.

Following several feet behind, he spotted the red-head as she cautiously made her way through the crowd.

Keeping his mouth from dropping open on sight became a conscious effort the instant he took in her slender frame.

"Ohâ€|.wow," he breathed softly.

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Even she had to admit that the outfit was pretty amazing. Willow smiled nervously and shifted her weight to her other foot. Her

>dark red hair was parted down the middle, rolled back and pinned on

either side of her head. It fell in gentle waves down her <br>back and shoulders. The dress she wore was white with dark green flowers which matched her eyes. Although somewhat short >for her own tastes, it still came past mid-thigh. The heels on her feet were a bit shorter than the ones Cordelia and Amy had on, <br>but almost the same style.

Squinting through the smokey darkness she tried to see through the bodies which were gyrating to the music. Altogether, the >scene was incredible. Tons of people had turned out to dance to the live band. Many of them were good. Very good. She'd <br>had no idea that so many residents of Sunnydale were such accomplished swing dancers.

Her mouth fell open as an especially impressive couple flew by. Thus far, she'd looked on in awe as they jumped, spun, twirled >and kicked. This time, the male suddenly flipped his partner over his arm and caught her just before she hit the ground. The <br>woman simply laughed and fell back in step with ease. Willow was rapidly starting to realize that the few basic steps she'd >picked up from Cordy earlier in the evening were nothing in comparison. <p>

To her left, Amy and Cordelia were sitting at a corner table, scanning the crowd as well. >Xander sat with them, although a little ways off. He gazed darkly at the table in front of him while nursing a coke. <p>

Grabbing the other girl's arm, Amy let out a barely contained squeal, "There he is! There he is!!"

Cordelia snapped around to look, "Oh my ever lovin God..check him out."

"Meeee-ow," Amy nodded her head in agreement, "And she looks just like Heather Graham from Swingers in that dress."

"Uh huh. Dead ringer."

Silently, they high fived eachother while bouncing up and down.

Xander just rolled his eyes.

Totally oblivious to the ongoing conversation going on just out of her earshot, Willow swayed slightly to the music. Ooh, Is >that him near the bar? &gt; Standing on her toes, she leaned forward to get a better view. An especially upbeat song had just <br>started playing and the dancing was escalating to an almost frenzied pace.

That's when she felt an hand on her shoulder, "Can I have this dance?"

Spinning around, she had to suppress the urge to gasp out loud.

There, standing right in front of her, fully decked out in a dark-grey pinstriped suit with a white flower in the lapel, was Angel.

>His already stunning good looks were only enhanced by the sharp clothing. There was no doubt in her mind that the outfit was  
<br>completely authentic.

"May I?" he reiterated the question, a slightly roguish grin on his face, "Have this dance?" he extended a hand to her.

Entirely flustered, Willow blushed just about every existing shade of red, "Oh-of course."

Not needing any further invitation than that, his gentlemanly demeanor vanished instantly, only to be replaced by a decidedly

>devilish gleam in his dark eyes. Grabbing her arm, he snapped her body against his and spun them both out into the middle of <br>the dance floor.

Within a matter of a few seconds, Willow found herself in the very thick of things. Positive that she must have run over at least  
>12 different people as he unceremoniously yanked her into the mass of bodies, she tripped along behind him, apologizing all the <br>way. Her apologies died in her throat the instant her turned back. The almost predatory look on his face scared the living  
>daylights out of her. Has he changed back? Oh my gosh&#128;| &gt;  
<p>

As if sensing her fear, Angel's features softened slightly and he winked at her flirtatiously, "Ready?"

Without waiting for her to reply, he grasped both of her hands and swung them out wards, then inwards, moving to the rhythm  
>of the music. Quickly, she picked up the beat and followed his lead. The first few seconds remained sedate enough until the <br>band suddenly went into an almost insanely fast riff and she felt her feet losing contact with the floor. Shrieking in surprise, she  
>was hauled over his shoulder, and thrown backwards, flipping upside down for a brief instant before landing safely behind him, <br>her back to his. Before she could even turn back around, she felt herself being lifted yet again and spun into the air before being  
>caught easily in his well-muscled arms. <p>

He held her up to his chest so they were almost eye level and chuckled good-naturedly at the shaken expression on her face.

"Put&#128;|me&#128;|down&#128;|" she ground out through clenched teeth.

"Sure, if you say so," he shrugged casually and started to lower her to the floor. Just as her toes brushed the ground, though, he

>whipped her outwards, careening right into the crowd. A split second before she fell over, he snagged her hand and snapped <br>her to a halt before spinning her back into him.

Now nestled comfortably and safely in his arms, Willow felt a dark, burning rage build slowly inside her How DARE he?  
>How dare he just throw me around like I was some sort of rag doll or something, I swear I'm going to&#128;| &gt; <p>

Her thoughts were interrupted by a strange sound.



Angel burst out laughing.

Looking up, horrifically annoyed, she made eye contact.

"I'm sorry, but the look on your face," he shook his head helplessly, "â€¦it's justâ€¦priceless."

Normally, this sort of reaction would have made the red-haired hacker even angrier but the rarity of the event itself made her  
>smile. Granted, she'd amused in the past, she'd occasionally even made him chuckle but this was the first time she'd ever heard <br>him laugh out loud. I've made Angel happy. Honest to goodness happy.  
>

Before she could get too self-congratulatory though, she felt him shifting his weight.

Uh oh. >

As he swung her out again, she caught her breath. Luckily, he just grinned kindly and held her to the simple box step.

Oh thank goodness. > The song was finally winding down and she felt herself relax as her eyes wandered up to his. Damn,  
>he's a good dancer. Why would anyone this good not want to flaunt it? Why was he flaunting it now? What the heck is going <br>on? >  
"Angel, what's gotten into you?" she yelled above the din of the crowd.

Not responding, he spun her out gently, causing her skirt to float higher up her thighs.

Wow. Matching green underwear, huh? > Angel raised an appreciative eyebrow.

Catching his gaze, she narrowed her eyes indignantly as he pulled her back into the box step. He simply chuckled, "Well, a  
>wise woman once said, that dancing was good for the soul," he began.  
<p>

She started giggling as she recalled their conversation, "Oh really?" she shouted back.

He nodded vigorously, "And you know what?" he asked.

"What?" she shouted back.

Yanking her to the side and gripping her waist wordlessly, he supported her with one hand while flipping her over his extended

>arm. Grabbing her again once she hit the ground, he spun her around into an embrace and dipped her low all in once fluid <br>motion.

Willow felt her world grind to a complete stop the instant the music ended.

His nose hovered right above her own and he smiled seductively.

"I think that she was right."  
> <p>

\*\*\*\*\*

## Part 20

The next song happened to be somewhat slower. Really slow, actually.

>Almost automatically, she felt a slight shiver run through her body as she gazed up into his dark eyes. <p>

"Angel, you can let me up now," she giggled, still stuck in their partial  
>embrace and leaning backwards at an odd angle. <p>

"Oops, sorry," he grinned back at her and gently righted them both.

Shooting him her classic awkward Willow-smile, she tucked her hair behind her ear and eased backwards to head over to her  
>table. Much to her surprise, he snagged ahold <br>of her hand and pulled her back.

"Where are you going?" he asked, honestly confused.

"Ohâ€¦I didn't think thatâ€¦.well, back to my  
tableâ€¦be-becauseâ€¦.", she stammered incoherently as he slid his arm around her  
>waist comfortable and took ahold of <br>her hand.

His eyes sparkled slightly and she placed her other hand on his shoulder. It was weird to slow-dance with someone. A lot  
>weirder than fast-dancing. Things weren't as frantic and  
<br>fly-away. They were a lot more sedate. Which gave one more time toâ€¦think.  
>Besides, her palms were getting sweaty. <p>

"Where'd your cut go?" he asked, gently brushing his fingertips just under her eye where  
>the injury from the arrow would have been. <p>

"Oh, it's..gone. Amy healed it for me."

Angel raised his eyebrows, "Getting stronger then, isn't she?"

Willow simply nodded nervously in response.

"I've actually been meaning to talk to you," he hissed softly into her ear as they began to sway comfortably together to the  
>music. <p>

"About?"

"Well, about my behavior these past few weeks."

"YOUR behavior?" she asked, a hint of incredulity entering her voice.

"I'm sorry for shutting you out. It was pretty wrong of me. I didn't mean to, well, make you feel like I'd abandoned you as a friend. If I did, I'm sorry." <p>

She shook her head in disbelief, "Angel, you have nothing to apologize about, believe me. I mean, I was the one who basically

>slammed the door in your face." She glanced up at him, "I felt so guilty about that. I really shouldn't have..acted the way I did.  
<br>I'm sorry for doing that to you. Good friends don't do that to each other and if anyone should be guilty of abandoning someone,

>well, it's me." <p>

His eyes met hers and there was a moment of silence before he laughed softly, "We're both so good at self-flagellation, aren't we?" <p>

Nodding, Willow smiled thoughtfully, "Yeah. We do have a tendency to beat ourselves up over a lot of things."

Spinning around gently, they moved farther back on the dance floor. She's wearing lilac perfume. > he realized. It smelled  
>nice. <p>

"How's Buffy?"

A shadow crossed over his features at the change of subject, "She's...well."

"What's going on with the two of you?"

"I don't know."

"Angel..," she began, a warning tone in her voice. He wasn't going to get away from the question that easily.

"Alright, alright," if he was going to share this with anyone, as is it was probably going to be Willow, "Truthfully, I'm not sure

>what she's thinking anymore. Sometimes she acts as if she wants to reconcile, and other times she acts as though she doesn't. <br>Like after I returned to my apartment last night, she was really..upset."

"What happened?" the hacker prodded gently.

"Well, first she was really quiet...and then there was a whole lot of yelling and then  
>it got a little violent." <p>

"Violent?"

"She, um, broke one of my paperweights. Then she accused me of not caring about her anymore, and I didn't know what to  
>say and then she just walked out. I ran after her <br>and brought her back to my apartment and we talked for the rest of the night. We both cooled down and apologized to  
>each other but..." <p>

"But?"

"But then she got that cold look in her eyes again. It's like one instant she wants to forgive and she wants to get back together

>and the next there's this undefineable guilt that she carries around." <p>

"Because of Jenny," Willow said softly.

Angel nodded his head, " I..ahh..I think that has a lot to do with it," his voice caught for a second.

It was so subtle that most people wouldn't have picked up on it, but she heard it almost instantly. Squeezing his arm in a show  
>of moral support she gave him a comforting smile. <p>

"I mean, being the slayer is hard enough as is without having this as added baggage."

"Do you think she still loves you?"

"I-I used to. I think a part of her still does and that part forces her to try to work things out. But I don't know if we can ever

>get past everything that's happened. <br>I mean, I don't want to feel that she's forcing herself to reconcile just for me."

"I remember the look on her face when Ms. Calendar died," Willow began quietly, "She just sat there on the floor without  
>saying so much as one word. I cried over it for a few days afterwards, but I never once remember Buffy shedding so much as <br>a tear. I mean, she couldn't. She was the slayer. It was her responsibility to save everyone else. She needed to be strong for

>the rest of the world." It was a painful subject, but one which needed to be discussed, "I think that in the process, she never  
<br>really dealt with it. She just kinda pushed it to the back of her head. I know she felt responsible for it though. I mean, loves all

>of us, but Giles holds a special place in her life. He was soâ€|hurt when Ms. Calendar died. Buffy never quite got over that. She  
<br>hated herself for not having the power to destroy the demon when she had the chance."

Angel looked away, "She'll never have any idea how sorry I am about that."

"I tried to explain to her that she wasn't responsible..that NO ONE was responsible

>for what happened," forcefully, Willow put her hand on his face and drew his eyes to her own, "I will never forgive the demon <br>for what it did. I hate it for killing Ms. Calendar, and I hate it for drawing Xander and I apart. I hate it for destroying a part of

>Giles and I hate it for hurting me." <p>

He stared at her in shock. Gently, he started to pull out of their embrace but she grabbed his arm.

"And most of all, I hate the demon for what it did to you. For how it controlled your body, manipulated your mind and hurt you both physically and emotionally." <p>

"Willow, I am the demon, it's a part of me that can't be sep-,"

"No you're not," she replied, "You can say it all you want but you're not. I know that much."

He just sighed, "Buffy doesn't seem to think so."

"Do you still love her?"

The question startled him. "W-what?"

"Do you still love Buffy?"

"I-Iâ€|yes. Of course I do."

Willow smiled almost sadly. It was now or never. In her heart, she knew she had to make a decisionâ€|

"You..," she lowered her gaze I can't. >, "you need to make sure she knows," she glanced back up, "If you love herâ€|you need to tell her." <p>

There was a pause and he concentrated on her face almost as if trying to gauge her emotions.

She held his gaze unwaveringly.

Bending closer, he gently touched the side of her face, "Willow, I-,"

"Mind if I cut in?"

Craning her neck, Willow saw the very subject of their conversation standing behind her.

"Buffy!" forcing a cheerful smile, she pulled away from Angel, "Sure, of course you can."

"Thanks," the slayer grinned back.

Willow stepped aside, giving room for the other girl to take her place. Buffy was wearing one of her classic outfits. A black

>miniskirt with a pale lavender halter top. Her blond hair was curled for the evening and fell around her face in careless wisps. <br>Her standard black boots completed the outfit, making her look edgy and somewhat dangerous. Which she was.

Pure Buffy > Willow thought as she watched the slayer melt easily into Angel's arms.

>The hacker looked almost frumpy in comparison. Throwing them both a half-hearted wave, she glued her gaze to the floor and <br>made her way to the exit.

> <br>The table Amy and Cordelia had been sitting at was now empty. Cordy was dancing with Xander and Amy was sitting near the

>bar, carrying on a very animated discussion with two boys Willow recognized as members of the crew team. <p>

Suddenly she felt very very tired. Drained.

Suddenly unable to deal with anyone anymore, she shrugged and grabbed her purse from the deserted booth. Turning, she  
>brushed a few tears out of her eyes and left the Bronze alone. <br>

\*\*\*\*\*

Noting the distracted look on her partner's face, Buffy turned her head and followed his gaze, "Angel, what's wrong? What's  
>going on?" <p>

Looking past her, he watched the red-head gather her things,  
"Thisâ€|this is not going to be easy to explain."

"What do you mean?"

"I..I don't knowâ€| how to," he turned back to give her his full attention, "Buffy, we need to talk."

"About?"

He sighed, "Everything."

The slayer finished watching Willow leave before staring back up at him seriously, "I think you're right."

They gazed at each other in silence before they realized that the song was no longer playing.

"Look at that. The music's ended," her face broke into a wistful smile.

"Yes," he replied softly, "yes it has."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Amy, where's Willow?"

"Dancing with Angel, where else?"

"Uhh..unless she dyed her hair blonde and took up wearing high-heeled boots then I'd have to vote no on that one."

The other girl glanced up. Sure enough, Willow was gone and Buffy had taken her place,  
>"W-what?" she shook her head in confusion, "but she was just here a second ago." <p>

"Well she's not here now."

"Bathroom?"

"Maybe."

"We should check."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Part 21

Instead of going home, she decided to make a pit stop at the library. Even through her exhaustion, Willow knew that if she was >going to give him his present before his birthday, she'd probably have to do it now. <p>

Although the walk from the Bronze to the school was almost 15 minutes, it'd been relatively uneventful.

Fumbling in her purse for the keys Giles had given her which led into the back entrance of the library, Willow finally found them >and unlocked the door. She'd squirrleled away all of the things she'd need for the spell and hid them in the less-used stacks at <br>the back of the large room. It was odd to be there alone at night.

Flicking on a few lights, she relaxed a bit.

The circumstances were still a little too close to those which took place almost a month ago when she'd originally restored >Angel's soul. Looking around the empty room and glancing out the door at the darkened hallway still gave her chills, but she <br>knew she had to concentrate on the task at hand.

If this worked, it would be well worth it.

\*\*\*\*\*

"So what exactly are you saying?"

"Answer the question, Buffy."

"No, I want to understand what you mean!"

"Buffy, I asked you if you still loved me. I think I deserve an answer."

They were standing in the alleyway just outside the Bronze and she was NOT happy.

"How can you ask me a question like that? D-don't you already know the answer?"

"I thought I did," he replied quietly.

In frustration she slammed her palm against the side of the buliding, "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you implying >that I've beenâ€¦|.,: her voice trailed off, "Look, if ANYONE has been ignoring our relationship, it's you. You stalk off late at <br>night, you don't like to talk to me, unless of course we're arguing and every time I try to touch you, you pull away."

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He'd had every intention of taking her back to his apartment where they could have a >quiet discussion about things, but somehow it had turned into a yelling match, "Buffy, please, calm down. We need to talk ab-,"

<p>

"We ARE talking about this, goddammit. At least I am. What's wrong with you? Why won't you let me in?"

"I-I tryâ€¦it's just that..sometimes it gets so hardâ€¦"

She let out a short, angry, laugh, "Don't talk to me about hard. You weren't the one who watched her friends get hunted, her  
>teacher get killed and her Watcher almost get burned to de-,"  
stopping abruptly, she stared at him. <p>

The look of pain in his eyes was almost unbearable.

Almost instantly, her tone became apologetic, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. I-I know that wasn't your fault Angel."

He just shook his head, "This is exactly what I'm talking about."

She dropped her gaze, "No it's not. This isn't about that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You now what I'm talking about."

He grew angry again, "No, Buffy I don't."

"You've fallen for her, haven't you?"

"What do y-,"

"Angel, please," she begged him softly, "don't do this. Just tell me the truth, No more games, no more accusations and no more

>fighting," she cupped his face in her hands, "Do you love her?"  
<p>

Every fiber in his being screamed to say no. It nearly killed him to see her so confused and so hurt. For all her strength she was

>still so fragile. The question was raw and brutal and he knew she wanted honesty but he'd give anything never to hurt her again.  
<br>Unfortunately, they knew each other too well. The look in his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

She broke down crying.

Holding her tightly he kissed her forehead and closed his eyes.

Her shoulders shook from the jagged sobs as she alternately clung to his shirt and beat his chest with her fists. Holding her  
>closer, he gently rocked them both back and forth.  
<p>

\*\*\*\*\*

"Echenna arel oo-rta," Willow paused to squint at the old, faded writing,  
>"Innae, wiah furdoonâ€¦fica-â€¦.fica-â€¦.fica-whozywhatsit?" In



exasperation she <br>stopped and picked the book up, "Geez, these people should write these things clearer.

Glancing up, she noticed that the pendant sitting before her had stopped glowing.

"Oh no. Don't do thatâ€|" sighing she picked it up and tapped on it tentatively, almost as if it were a flashlight low on batteries,

>"Glow darn it, glow." <p>

The orb thing was so much easier. The whole spell was on a computer printoutâ€| life was simpler back thenâ€| > Biting her lip in frustration, she reached over the table for a piece of scrap paper and a pen, "Well, I might as well transcribe this  
<br>phonetically so I can read it."

Dropping the pendant back into its bowl, she started scribbling furiously on the paper while leaning over the book. She was

>almost half-way through before her watch started beeping. Five minutes past the hour..time to stir the solution. &gt; She  
<br>grabbed the bowl with the pendant and swirled it around in the clear colored liquid. Kinda like baking! > she thought happily  
>as she stirred away. That's when the liquid turned a strange gold color and started bubbling. <p>

Okay, maybe not. >

\*\*\*\*\*

"She's not here."

"What do you mean she isn't here?" Xander broke in, somewhat panicked.

"She's missing."

"We need to find her. Did you call her house?"

"Yup, twice. There's no answer. Actually, you can go try that again and I'll find Buffy and Angel."

"Wait-there's Buffy."

Running through the crowd to catch the Slayer before she left, Cordelia intercepted the other girl.

"Buffy, we need your he-," the words choked off as soon as she saw the blonde girl's face.

Her hair was somewhat mussed and her clothing was wrinkled. Buffy's eyes were red and swollen and her mascara was  
>streaked down her face. <p>

"Ohmigosh, what happened?"

"It's nothing. What do you want Cordelia?" mildly embarrassed, she sniffled slightly and pulled herself up straighter while wiping

>some of the makeup off her face. <p>

"Willow's missing."

The slayer's eyes opened wider, "What?"

"She left alone, we think. She must've gone about an hour ago and there's no answer

>at her house. Xander's calling there again and Amy went over to check on her." <p>

"We need to find her," shivering internally, Buffy sensed that something was very very wrong with this situation.

"What's going on?" Cordelia asked, somewhat surprised by the intensity of the slayer's words.

"This isn't good. Not good at all. We need to find her beforeâ€|wellâ€|.we just need to find her now."

Cordelia nodded silently as Buffy pushed past her and started for the exit, "Call Giles. Tell him to meet us at the library."

"Sure thingâ€|But where's Angel?" the dark-haired girl called after her.

Buffy didn't respond.

\*\*\*\*\*

He stood outside her darkened house with his hands in his pockets. His heart still stung from what had just transpired with >Buffy, but he knew deep down, that it was the right thing to do. <p>

She deserved an honest answer and he needed to straighten things out between them once and for all.

Letting her go was probably one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life.

Shaking his head he leaned against the street lamp. I'll just wait for her here. >

All of a sudden, a figure appeared on the porch. As in, literally appeared.

In a glittering mass of sparkles and fire Amy Madison materialized. From the frantic look on the girl's face, Angel could tell that

>something was wrong. <p>

"C'monâ€|open the doorâ€|open the door," the blonde teenager pushed the bell repeatedly while hopping around on the >welcome mat. The bell's shrill sound could be d echoing throughout the empty house, "Damn," she muttered under her breath. <p>

"Amy? What's going on?"

She spun around "Oh, Angel. Umm..have you seen Willow?"

His features darkened, " Not since I saw her in the Bronze. Why?"

"She's missing."

"What?"

Amy looked near tears, "She's missing and we can't find her."

"Calm down, it's okay," he replied soothing. Outwardly calm, he could feel the panic bubbling up within his chest, "We'll find her." <p>

"You don't understandâ€|"

"Then help me to."

"I-I've been having these..well, these nightmares lately."

His eyes narrowed slightly, "Nightmares?"

"Nightmaresâ€|visionsâ€|whatever. They've been getting moreâ€|vivid not to mention violent and, well, have you ever had deja vu?" <p>

He nodded numbly.

"Ever since she leftâ€|I've been getting this odd feelingâ€|almost as if I've been here before or witnessed this happen. It took a long time for me to figure outâ€|but now I think I know what's going on." <p>

"What?"

"Something terrible is going to happen tonight and with Willow missing...it might already be too late to stop it. "

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## Part 22

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This part is rated PG-13 for violent content. Feedback is always appreciated.  
> <br>

Firmly locking the library doors behind her, Willow smiled as she replaced the keys in her purse. If the tiny explosion which had almost singed the bottom of her hair had been any indication, the spell had proven successful. With a little luck, by <br>tomorrow morning Angel would be enjoying his birthday present. Checking her watch, Willow gasped softly at the time, "Past 4am? Geez, I'd <br>better get back home. Amy must be flipping out."

Although it was usually too dangerous to walk around this late at night, things had been pretty tame on terms of vampiric activity

>lately. She felt that she could risk the five minute walk home.  
<p>

Taking out her stake, just in case, she headed down the street and turned the corner, just missing the car that pulled into the

>school parking lot behind her. <p>

Oblivious to her surroundings, she whistled happily while contemplating the look on Angel's face when he got his gift. She was

>positive he'd love it. <p>

Less than two blocks away from her house, she heard a noise. Almost like a shuffling sound. Turning her head to glance behind  
>her, something cold, hard, and metallic came in contact with the back of her neck. <p>

Almost instantly, she fell forward, the pain lancing down her spine.

Roughly, several pairs of hands hoisted her upwards and then flung her body into a nearby alley. Tripping, she fell into the cold,

>wet pavement, scraping her knee against the cement ground.  
<p>

Bleary eyed she looked up and saw five—no, make that six young male vampires standing around her.

"This the wench Spike told us to get?"

"Yup, see the red 'air?" one of them chuckled as he grabbed a fistfull of her locks and yanked her head upwards painfully.

"She's a skinny li'le thing, ain't she?" One of the younger ones remarked.

"Yeah, what's Spike want with 'er?" piped up another.

"She's one of the slayer's chums. She's also close with our dearly departed Angelus, so it seems."

Becoming fully conscious of her situation, Willow began struggling with the vampire who was holding her hair. She was  
>rewarded with a quick kick to the chest which broke a few of her ribs. The pain was immense. It exploded almost instantly and  
<br>melted throughout her entire upper body. Coughing up blood, she rolled over, trying to get away again. This time her captor  
>just laughed and slammed her head into the pavement before releasing his hold on her hair. <p>

"Feisty whore ain't she?"

"Too bad we have to kill 'er."

"I know. It is a bloody pity. She's kinda cute."

"She'd make a good consort, don't ya think?"

"No mate, you remember what Spike said, we have to kill this one. No messing around."

"Well, I was just sayingâ€¦"

Willow moaned helplessly and tried to crawl up.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's get this done with. I think we're losing our audience," the first one smiled wickedly, "We'll 'ave to teach

>our guest about having better manners." <p>

She had just managed to flip herself onto her back when she got a good look at the figures surrounding her. Much to her  
>horror, each was carrying a long, metal pole. <p>

"Ready boys? Now remember to put your backs into it," one of them called out.

She let out a strangled scream.

"Let's go."

All at once, the bright poles came down on her body, smashing her arm, shattering her leg and bruising her internal organs. The

>pain was so great that she couldn't even call out for help. It shot through her body like molten lava through her veins. <p>

There was a brief wooshing noise as they were drawn back up and again the poles pummeled her body. She heard a snapping  
>noise before she felt the pain of her other leg breaking. One vampire brought his pole down vertically instead of horizontally,  
<br>impaling her foot and twisting it at an odd angle on the pavement. There was a second breif respite as the weapons were

>simultaneously raised and she felt her stomach contract. <p>

The poles came down again, this time, slamming partially into her face, breaking part of her jaw, and ripping a gash into her

>forehead. Her brain was literally set on fire from the sensory overload. Vaguely, she throught she could hear laughter in the  
<br>distance, but the blood was rushing so loudly into her ears that she couldn't be sure.

She felt her mind start to shut down in an attempt to escape the pain. As her eyes fluttered shut, she felt the poles come

>crashing down againâ€¦and againâ€¦blood filled her lungs and she choked and gasped for air until the darkness finally claimed <br>her. The last prayer to filter through her mind was simply for the pain to stop.

It didn't.

\*\*\*\*\*

Giles checked his watch. 4:30 am.

He shook his head nervously and took off his glasses to clean them for what must have been the tenth time in the past fifteen

>minutes. Pretty soon he'd just wear a hole through the lenses.  
<p>

"G-man!" Xander came running into the library, causing the Watcher to almost drop the  
>book he was holding. <p>

"Y-yes, Xander?"

"What happened?" they asked simultaneously.

"Ohâ€|she's not here? You haven't heard from her?" the boy sounded distinctly disappointed.

"No," Giles felt his own heart sinking.

"We didn't find her. Cordy's still driving around, though."

"Yes, well Buffy hasn't been back yet either."

"We checked all around the bronze and the park and the yogurt shop and kinda near her house but there was no sign of her."

"Buffy is checking the sewers and the cemetery to see if she canâ€|coax some information."

"Where's Amy?"

"She just returned from checking around here and Cordelia's house. She's in my office."

"How is she?"

"Still very upset. She honestly believes this has something to do with her nightmares."

Xander nodded.

"Perhaps you should go speak to her," Giles ventured gently.

A hesitant look crossed the boy's face but it quickly disappeared, "Yes. I think I will."

>He started across the room, "Hey Giles, what do you think? Is it really possible that this is all a part of Amy's dream?"  
<p>

Replacing the glasses on his nose, the Watcher shook his head sadly, "I hope not, Xander," he sounded tired, "I hope not."

\*\*\*\*\*  
> <br>

It was nearly 5 in the morning and Angel knew he was running out of time. The sun would be up very soon and he still hadn't  
>been able to find Willow. <p>

Rounding the corner a few blocks away from her house, he decided to go back to check if she'd returned.

He'd gotten about five feet down the street when he smelled it.

Blood.

The scent hit him like a wall, full in the face, so strongly that he wrinkled his nose.

What the hell? > Breaking into a jog, he headed towards it.

As he drew closer, his sensitive ears picked up other sounds. There was a soft, muffled scraping sound coming from nearby.  
>Then another scent hit him. <p>

Lilacs.

The jog almost instantly turned into a full throttled run. Rounding another corner, he swung into the alley.

And started choking almost immediately.

There, lying stretched out on the pavement, beat until she was barely recognizeable was Willow. The scraping noise was the  
>sound of her watch as it scratched against the pavement when her hand twitched. <p>

"Will-," he started for her, a lump growing in his throat. Suddenly he was attacked from behind.

In his haste to reach her, he had neglected the solitary figure lurking in the shadows. One of Spike's young thugs had stayed

>behind to make sure that the hacker would slowly bleed to death.  
<p>

And now he was making the mistake of attacking a very angry, borderline hysterical Angel.

A split second after the younger man grabbed him around the waist, something deep inside Angel snapped. With an almost  
>animalistic scream, he lurched forward and swung his attacker over his head and into a wall. <p>

Without even seeing, thinking, or hearing, he advanced upon the slightly stunned young man.

"Who sent you?" he bellowed in fury as he hauled him up and slammed him backwards into the wall. His face had already  
>changed into an ugly, bony, snarl. <p>

"Spike," came the weak response.

"Really?" Angel purred, his eyes glowing a brighter yellow, "then I won't kill you."

The other man looked relieved. That is, until Angel ripped into his throat and tore it partially out, "You can die all by yourself."

With practiced ease, he proceeded to snap both of the younger man's legs and hauled the damaged body outside into the middle of the street where he dumped it unceremoniously to the ground. <p>

"This way, you'll either bleed to death or burn to death when the sun rises. Have fun," he spat.

Running back into the alley, Angel stooped next to Willow's broken body, "Hang in there. I'm going to get you to the hospital."  
>He glanced at his watch. 5:02. The sun was scheduled to rise at 5:11. Carefully cradling her in his arms, he rose and started to  
<br>run in the direction of Sunnydale Emergency.

"Anâ€|Angel?"

His heart leapt to his throat when he heard her speak his name. It came off like a soft squeak. He'd never heard anyone sound  
>so tortured. <p>

"Oh God, Willowâ€|it's meâ€|I'm going to get you help."

She managed to smile weakly before retching up blood, "Angel?" she asked again blearily, "It's your birthdayâ€|"

"Shhâ€|don't talk. Please Willow, don't say anything just save your strength and hang in there."

"Iâ€|I can see youâ€|in my head."  
>It wasn't until then that he noticed the almost vacant look in her green eyes. <p>

After almost an hour of severe beating, Willow was well past seeing.

He started to weep gently, his tears mixing with her blood.

"You have a really nice smile," she continued obliviously, "you should smile..moreâ€|moreâ€|..often." Gasping from the effort,

>her face suddenly contorted in pain, "Promise me that you'll smile more often," she gasped. <p>

He nodded vigorously, "I willâ€|"

Suddenly she let out a high-pitched, slightly demented giggle, "It's your birthday, you know."

He shook his head helplessly, "Willow, pleaseâ€|please don't do this. Don't talk. You need to save your strength."

She gave him a peaceful smile, "Why?"

He glanced at his watch. 5:07.

"B-because I need to get you to the hospital. They're going to help you," he replied incoherently.



"Oh noâ€|they won't be able to," she smiled up at him, "I'm going to die, Angel"

"Don't say that!" he whispered harshly.

"But it's the truth," she responded in almost child-like innocence, "I feel so cold."

"It's loss of blood," he started to cut through the park.

It was 5:09.

"Don't leave me," she murmured softly, "Please, don't leave me, Angel. I feel safe with you. You'll save me." She smiled again.

He glanced down at her and knew it was true. Tears flooding his own eyes, he shook his head angrily. Willow was going to die.

In that one moment he made his decision, turning, he started to make his way in the opposite direction.

"Talk to me, Angel," she whispered, "I like the sound of your voice."

"I-I'm sorry Willow, I-I can'tâ€|," he managed to choke out.

"That's okayâ€|."

There were several more seconds of silence as he rushed towards the hill. Nearing his goal, he took in the view. It was a huge

>emerald mound which sat at the very edge of the park. From the top of it, one could see almost all of Sunnydale. Including the  
<br>sunriseâ€|

"Angel?" she asked again, her voice strangely clear this time.

He hurriedly made his way up the incline, holding her tightly against his chest, "Yes?"

"I'mâ€|I'm sorryâ€|."

Approaching the climax, he glanced down at her, "It wasn't your fault. You had no way of..of knowing what was going to  
>happen. They were after me, not you. I should have warned you b-but, I just never thought.." <p>

"No, silly," she giggled suddenly, "I'm not talking about that."

It was 5:10.

"Then what?"

"I'm sorry I fell in love with you," she replied calmly.

He just stared at her in complete shock, completely at a loss for words. Vaguely, in the distance, the first rays of light began to

>spread over the sky. <p>

"Willow..I love you too."

"Oh good," she smiled innocently, "that makes me happy."

Glancing up at the horizon he felt a strange tingling sensation in his body. So this is what it feels like to die in the sunâ€| >

It was 5:11.

Gritting his teeth he stared straight ahead and prepared for the inevitable fire which would engulf them both.

"Goodbye Willow," he murmured.

And with those words, the sun broke free into the sky. Even he had to squint at its brilliance. In the 240 years he'd spent in the

>dark, he'd almost forgotten how beautiful it was to be in the light.  
<p>

The lovely orb continued its ascent into the sky as Angel waited for his fate.

>And waitedâ€|and waitedâ€| <p>

Aside from the initial tingling which had gradually dissipated and the faint warmth of the light on his skin, there was absolutely

>nothing. No pain, no burns, no fire, nothing. His surprise turned to shock. <p>

She shifted slightly in his arms and he looked down again, "Happy Birthday Angel," she sighed before her eyes fluttered shut.

And so, on a clear spring day, on top of a hill at 5:14 in the morning, just past sunriseâ€|

Willow Ann Rosenberg died.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's not over yet! Coming Soon....parts 23-25  
> <br>

End  
file.